

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM

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Cover: Antoine Le Nain, French (1588:-1648), Three Young Musicians, oil on panel, 101/4 x 131/4." Anonymous Gift. L. 2100. A. 92.58-1.

ANTOINE LE NAIN'S

Three Young Musicians

HE CHARMING picture of *Three Young Musicians* by Antoine Le Nain (1588:-1648) illustrated on the cover of this issue of the *Bulletin*, and in Figure 1, is a very welcome recent addition to the Museum's permanent collection. It came to us as an anonymous gift in order to augment handsomely an area of our collection that needs strengthening, French painting of the seventeenth century. The pomp and grandeur, as well as the Classicistic aspects of Baroque art, as displayed in the works of Vouet, Bourdon, or Poussin are still absent from our galleries; but, with the addition of this small, intimate and poignantly human scene, the vital and equally important dimensions of Baroque naturalism can be added to the experience of Los Angeles museum visitors.

The scene represents a child of about ten, at the extreme right, holding a sheet of music and singing. At the left a youth of about sixteen holds a large guitar across his knees. The central figure is a boy whose age is midway between the other two, and he plays the violin. They are shown in a dim interior, grouped around a small rustic table, upon which are casually arrayed a tumbler partially filled with wine, an open book with well-thumbed pages and worn binding, a thin clay peasant's pipe for smoking, a simply-turned brass candlestick holding the stump of a single taper, and a large, cheap earthenware mug. Seated up front and dead center, with his head and shoulders just protruding into the picture, is a small mongrel dog who seems fully assured of the need for his critical inclusion in the little ensemble.

The engaging simplicity of this subject matter and the technical methods that have been used to represent it are the epitome of the style of Antoine Le Nain. The picture is done on a thin wooden panel in typically modest size, 10½ x 13½ inches. Of the dozen or so paintings generally attributed to Antoine Le Nain, five are on panels of copper, while the rest are on wood, with the exception of a replica of our subject, somewhat larger in size, done on canvas, and now in the collection of the

Duke of Cervinara. This latter version of the subject was well known since the last quarter of the nineteenth century when it was in the collection of Lord Aldenham in England, while our picture was in the uncatalogued collection of Count Potocki in Poland. From the Potocki collection it was acquired by the Rothschild family, and a few years ago it was obtained from Maurice de Rothschild by the generous donors of it to the museum. It is painted in a rich oil medium with a refreshing directness and simplicity that harmonizes with and enhances the earthy conception of the subject matter. Shortly before coming to the Museum the picture was cleaned carefully, and the signature, "Le Nain," located just behind the dog's head below the open book on the table, was found to be an integral part of the original seventeenth century paint structure.

As Anthony Blunt has so aptly remarked in his excellent survey, Art and Architecture in France, 1500-1700, "More ink has been spilt over the 'Le Nain problem' than over any other question in French seventeenth century art." The reason for "the problem" is that there were three brothers, Antoine, Louis, and Mathieu, all with the surname Le Nain, and all three were painters. With one or two exceptions, whenever they signed their works, they simply affixed the name "Le Nain" in an obscure part of the picture. Which brother, did what, and when, has vexed the historians of art for nearly a century. The earliest tendency was to follow the naive and unbelievable assertion of the eighteenth century writer Mariette, who, in his Abcedario, makes artistic Siamese twins of Antoine and Louis by saying: "They were in such perfect accord in their work that it was impossible to tell that which each one had done in the same picture; for they worked in common, and there was hardly a picture that came from their studio in which each had not had a hand." It is accepted generally among scholars today that Mariette's assertion is a somewhat romantic generalization fabricated to accommodate the "Le Nain problem" in the absence of historical information about the three brothers, and made at a time long before all their known works had been studied carefully from a stylistic and comparative point of view.

Intense interest in the works of the three brothers, and the beginnings of a higher regard for their pictures, did not develop until the middle of the nineteenth century. This fact in itself reveals a great deal about history's critical judgment of these artists, as well as underlining once again the changeability of that oft-imputed judgment depending upon time. The champions of Courbet, Manet, and Daumier, and the friends of Zola and the Goncourt brothers, were the men who began to revive and study the Le Nain. That is to say, it was only after the industrial and social revolution of the modern era had created realism, naturalism, and the beginning of im-



Antoine Le Nain, Three Young Musicians

pressionism, and only after an avant-garde of critics who could appreciate the significance and high æsthetic qualities of these basically nineteenth century styles had come into existence, that the humble subject matter and direct naturalism of the Le Nain brothers began to bask in the light once again.

Champfleury, the great advocate for recognition of Courbet, was the first of these. Champfleury was a native of the city of Laon, a cathedral town in northeastern France close to the borders of Flanders, in which the Le Nain family had flourished modestly two-and-a-half centuries earlier. In 1850 Champfleury published the first critical Le Nain study called *Essai sur la vie et l'æuvre des Le Nain, Peintres Laonnais*. He brought to light one of the basic documents pertaining to the Le Nain, a manuscript in the City Library entitled *Histoire de Laon*, penned between 1711–1726 by a native son named Claude L'Eleu who described himself as "...priest, doctor of The Sorbonne, canon and archdeacon of the cathedral church of Laon." This testimonial, couched in a provincial and quaint style of French, difficult for

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1632. At this time there began to flourish three able painters who were natives of the city of Laon, who were brothers, who lived in perfect harmony, and who were known as Antoine, Louis and Mathieu Le Nain. They followed the taste and inclination they had for painting, having been formed in this art by a foreign painter who taught them and instructed them in all the rules of this art during the space of a year at Laon. After that they went to Paris where they perfected themselves, and where they all lived together in the same house. Their characters were different; Antoine, who was the eldest, and who was made official painter for [the church of] St. Germain des Pres by the Sieur Plantin, judge advocat at court and bailiff of the District of St. Germain, on May 16, 1629, excelled in miniature pictures and small portraits. Louis, who was younger, succeeded in half-length portraits and busts. Mathieu, who was the youngest, was for pictures in the grand manner, such as those representing mysteries, the martyrdom of saints, battles, and such like. All three were painters to the king, and were received into the Royal Academy on the same day, their letters of appointment being dated March 1, 1648, and signed by the famous painter, the Sieur Le Brun, one of the elders of The Academy. Antoine and Louis died, one after the other, within three days of each other, without having been married [in the same year they were elected to The Academy, 1648]. Mathieu, who survived them, was appointed painter-in-ordinary to The City of Paris by the Provost of Merchants in the Town Hall of that city on August 22, 1633. He had the martial spirit, since on August 29th he was received as lieutenant in the company of militia under The Sieur du Ry... On September 13, 1662 he obtained letters of commitment as a painter of quality of The Royal Academy. It is said of him that, while painting the Queen, Anne of Austria, one day when the King, Louis XIII, was present, the King said that the Queen had never been painted on such a fine day. [A rather non-committal æsthetic judgment, but adequate enough praise in the eyes of the king's subjects, evidently.]

One of Claude L'Eleu's laments in this document is that these artists from his native city, although "...perfect according to their time...", "...were not done adequate justice by the French author of famous painters." Here he refers to the celebrated "taste-maker," Felibien, who wrote in his *Entretiens* of 1725: "The Brothers Le Nain painted portraits and history pieces, but in an ignoble manner, often representing simple subjects without beauty." This prejudice against an art of "simple subjects" dissolved as nineteenth century positivism replaced seventeenth and

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"simth and eighteenth century euphuism; and, although Claude L'Eleu's manuscript contained the bare and basic factual bones about the Le Nain, further research on them quickly followed. Shortly after Champfleury's initial study, such apostles of historical and philosophical naturalism as St. Beuve himself turned their attention to elucidating the Le Nain; a portion of St. Beuve's Volume IV of Nouveaux Lundis, 1865, is devoted to the three painters. But it was the scholars who were more specifically oriented toward art who produced the facts about them and provided the foundation for today's appreciation of their art. In 1876 Jules Guiffrey published the results of his research, Nouveaux Documents, in which we can learn something about Isaac Le Nain, the father, whose will of 1630 arranged for his sons to receive all of his property in and near Laon "... upon condition that [his wife] be well supported, nourished, and housed in this city [Laon] until the end of her days." This was Isaac's second wife, Jeanne Dautart, whom he married in 1628 with the proviso in the contract that she acknowledged the payment of one-thousand-two-hundred lires in case the marriage were dissolved. This substantiality is borne out in the list of properties itemized in the will of 1630; a home on Rue des Presbtres, Laon, another house at Campignolle, farmland at St.-Julien-de-Royaucourt, some lots, woodlands and vineyards at Vauxcelles, etc. That the three brothers did indeed live and work in perfect concord is attested to by a joint will drawn up before the death of Antoine and Louis in 1648, in which these considerable properties were amicably distributed among nephews and other relatives, with due provision being made for whichever brothers should survive, or for any children that any brother might have. None of the three entered into matrimony, however, and there were no direct heirs.

In 1904 Antony Valabregue, the critic whose intense likeness has come down to us through the brush of Cézanne, published his survey, *Les Frères Le Nain*, in which all of the findings of each scholar before him were gathered and systematically set down. His principle contribution to our knowledge, in addition to organizing the material, was to paint a vivid historical and social background against which the brothers acted out their lives. From the point of view engendered by the relative stability, safety, and comfort of recent history, the age of Charles IV, Louis XIII, and the early reign of Louis XIV in France seems like a nightmare of anxiety, war, pillage, brutal labor, incessant over-taxation, primitive living conditions (especially in a provincial spot like Laon), and the constant search for relief from these burdens through the simple pleasures so often painted by the Le Nain brothers—family feasts, barnyard dances, convivial wine drinking, children saying grace, bountiful harvests, and the natural recourse to music. Over and over again, these same themes, with variations, appear on the copper and wooden panels. Very often the same faces

and figures occupy the different stages, singing, reciting, dancing, or revealing the ability to play more than one instrument. And even the same little dog appears more than once. Obviously, these pictures are true-to-life records of the salt of the earth. They are among the purest reflections of a seventeenth century movement aptly described by Paul Fierens in his 1933 study, *Les Le Nain:* "... there was in the air, at the outset of the seventeenth century and practically all over Europe, a sentiment for the authentic life of the soil, a love of the every day, of the natural, of the elementally picturesque, a humble realistic fervor..." Those who made the world's wheels turn from their high positions, and the sophisticated life surrounding them there, seemed to be the source of the rest of humanity's miseries; so there developed a profound respect and yearning for the simpler facets of life that often found articulation in art.

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The fact that works by the Le Nain were confused with paintings by Dutch. Flemish, and even Italian artists for more than two centuries serves to emphasize the point that this "humble realistic fervor" was a general European phenomenon. One picture, now universally attributed to Mathieu, hung for years in the Dutch galleries of the The Louvre. A portrait, accepted always as a Le Nain, has now been given to Michael Sweerts. A canvas labelled as a Honthorst in the Brunswick Museum has been attributed variously by different scholars to one of the Le Nain, to Sweerts, or to Murillo. Valabregue said, "The Le Nain are our own French Flemings," thus accentuating the strong note of Netherlandish realism in their work. Was it the result of direct influence? Who was the "foreign painter" mentioned by Claude L'Eleu who came to Laon and taught them in this art? We don't know, but the location of Laon makes an itinerant artist from the Low Countries the most logical supposition. Mariette said, "Antoine and Louis Le Nain painted bambochades in a French style." A bambochade takes its name from the Dutchman, Pieter Van Laar, an Italianized native of Haarlem who lived in Rome when Claude Lorrain, Poussin, and Sandrart were there, and, who was nicknamed Bamboccio by the Italians. Unlike his august colleagues, he specialized in rough genre scenes with subjects taken from the tavern, barracks, or barnyard. As the Italian word bamboccio implies, the emphasis was upon the humor inherent in rustic and common human situations; the interpretation usually verged on caricature and the rowdy, notwithstanding the composition which was "arranged" according to the academic tenets of the time. This point of view, conveyed with Caravaggio's dramatic chiaroscuro to heighten the realistic effect, spread all over Europe during the middle of the seventeenth century.

Careful stylistic and technical study, resulting in at least general agreement upon the recognizability of three distinct hands, began in earnest with the exhibition organized in London by Sir Robert Witt in 1910, and with the publication of the catalogue for the show, Catalogue of Pictures by The Brothers Le Nain, Burlington Fine Arts Club. At about this time Paul Jamot began his Etudes sur les frères Le Nain, which were published in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts during 1922-23, and which later culminated with his excellent book, Les Le Nain, 1929. The result is that there are three main groups of pictures, each with its own distinct characteristics, to which the names of the three brothers have been convincingly applied.

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Mathieu Le Nain, the "Sieur," the militarily inclined, and the brother who lived long enough to enjoy his inheritance, was considerably touched by the bamboccio. But not Antoine or Louis. In their humble subject matter we find none of the brawling, shouting, gesticulating, and sometimes drunken peasants of a Teniers or Brouwer: none of the sly malicious humor of a Georges de la Tour or Honthorst: none of the subtle, dark suggestiveness of a Velasquez bodegon. They did not try to dramatize or heroicize the peasants upon whom they turned their light. They painted their little fêtes, benedicites, rustic concerts, and family groups with a kind of simple reverence that defies analysis.

Louis was the best painter of the three, and, without relying in the slightest upon Baroque formulas of composition, he endows his subjects with a dignity and grandeur seldom achieved by such direct and seemingly modest means. His sensitivity to light, color, and atmosphere, the delicacy of his handling of the paint, the honesty and apparent inevitability of the placement of objects in a scene, the clarity of his spaces, the rugged solidity of structure of his figures, and, above all, a persuasive sincerity in every facet of his work has caused him to be dubbed "le bon Le Nain."

Antoine, the oldest of the brothers, has been called the "primitive" among them. His figures often seem to have heads a bit too large for the bodies beneath, and the placement of the figures, with hardly ever enough room at the bottom of the composition, gives them a huddled aspect. His color is more intense, and frequently almost harsh. He makes no concessions whatsoever to the "arranged" or academic ideal in composition. He equals his brother Louis in eschewing the slightest temptation to glorify or ennoble his represented personages, and, as much as it is possible for any artist, he lets the subject speak for itself. His brushwork is direct and heavy, with an emphasis on the material earthiness of the paint. For many a rococo critic and academician these qualities have been the excuse to put down Antoine as a clumsy clod. But if one sees them fully in relationship to the artist's subject matter, they can be appreciated as the ideal means to achieve a profound and touching content, as they do in our beautiful new picture.

FIG. I. New England pine drawer-chest of about 1700, the front with painted folk decoration. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Murray Braunfeld



Some Pilgrim-Century Furniture

HE RECENT GIFT of three extraordinary pieces enhances the Museum collection of early American furniture which in the past few years has shown a steady growth. None of this increase has come from County purchases, but all of it by the generous gift of examples or in purchases made possible by private bequest funds. Following an established plan, the collection now represents a range of American types from the latter seventeenth century to about 1825, though from want of gallery space many pieces must languish unseen for the present.

Within the 150-year period to which our efforts are confined, nearly all the best American furniture is to be found. After that time a rapidly spreading use of steam-powered machinery introduced cheap and time saving factory methods. Markets were expanding, the building of great canals in the 1820's and railroads in the 1830's facilitated distribution, and in every department of work the old craftsmanly skills were giving way to an age of mass production. With the great success of Eli Terry's "perfected wood clock" (1814) came the avalanche of low priced Connecticut wood-

enworks clocks, and the famous stencilled Hitchcock chair (1818) was imitated in small chair factories that sprung up everywhere. Deming Jarves' machine introduced 1825 at the Sandwich glasshouse launched the enormously prosperous pressed glass industry; by 1830 almost all the old pewtersmiths had turned to factory-made britannia wares, spun up on a lathe; blue Staffordshire pottery cheaply transfer-printed with American historical subjects, selling for pennies and made in enormous editions, had an insatiable market in the 1820's. And with this multiplied production came a general decline in the public taste. For want of other criteria, people now mistook mere elaboration for excellence—the biggest, the fanciest, was necessarily the best. Though he continued to work until 1846, in the coarse styles then demanded by his patrons, Duncan Phyfe (1768-1854) the celebrated New York cabinetmaker who once had produced such elegant designs described his own output in the latter years as "butcher furniture."

True, the availability of cheerful and inexpensive stuff after about 1825 meant that comforts and conveniences were now enjoyed by the commonfolk who formerly had so little of either. Yet all the more gratefully we turn to earlier work, for its proud craftsmanship and a certain warm reflection of the maker's individual taste.

Our new acquisitions represent two very different aspects of first-century furniture, belonging to the latter part of the so-called Pilgrim Century (1620-1720) when a mediæval character still survived in much oak- or pine-built work but a new class of sophisticated and even luxurious pieces began to be seen. Boston in 1690 had a population of 7,000 which increased to 12,000 by 1720. It now had two newspapers, the *Boston News-Letter* appearing in 1704 and the *Boston Gazette* fifteen years later. Increase of trade and an expanding economy rapidly changed the character of urban life at the turn of the century.

But our first (Fig. 1) is a village-made chest, after the type of simple folk work that existed independent of changing "period" styles. In such rude pieces the maker's fancy took free rein, perhaps drawing upon half-remembered styles of carved or painted decoration but creating odd and useful things to satisfy a particular need. Here, nothing could be plainer than a board carcass filled with four drawers, born without feet and fitted with small wooden knobs set high on the drawer faces.

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FIG. Ia. Detail of drawers, showing "side runners" and early construction

Of itself, the idea of a drawer-chest was quite new in 1700. Lift-top storage chests had served since mediæval times, doing sometime duty as trunks when making a journey. Adding a drawer at the bottom so increased their convenience that during the seventeenth century chests were made with a second or even a third. But so slow are people in catching on to a good idea, it was not until the end of the century that full chests of drawers came into general use, filling the frame with handy pull-out drawers and omitting the lift-top storage space.

Here the early type of drawer construction is still seen, a "side runner" drawer that slides not on its bottom edges but has slotted ends that ride on cleats nailed inside the ends of the chest (see detail, Fig. 1a). Another mark of earliness is the use of a single bold-cut dovetail joining the drawer front and side. After the late seventeenth century these joints would show three or more pairs of interlocking



of a pair of caned "periwig" chairs in Murray Braunfeld

teeth whose cutting was constantly refined. until by 1800 the dovetailed corner finished in a row of thin knife-sharp blades. The lavish use of lumber is also characteristic-here, boards 15/16" thick for the ends of the top drawer, a full 11/4 inches for the other three, or about twice the thickness customary in the eighteenth century. The rails between the drawers show frankly "exposed" tenons, cutting clear through the ends of the chest and showing on the surface. And plain half-round astragal or "single arch" molding finishes all the front edges of our chest,-a detail which in William & Mary highboys or Queen Anne chests usually gave way to the more refined "double arch" molds.

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These points of construction serve to date at about 1700 a very plain chest whose spirited painting is its only claim to style. Now worn and faded, the brushwork in

contrasting red, white and black must have given the piece a startling briskness. This is no amateur work, but drawn in free and assured strokes—a row of roosters down the centers of the drawers, flanked on the top drawer by paired lovebirds and on the other three by a fleur de lis and flourishes.

For its style of painting, our chest has no match among published examples. A group of early Connecticut pieces found near Madison and Guilford² are decorated in rather more ambitious manner, with crowns and thistles, tulips and fleurs de lis. The well known decorated chests of Taunton belong to the later period 1725-42 and are painted in much lighter spirit. From its general character and construction we are inclined to assign our own chest to Western Massachusetts, an area further indicated by its use of red pine for the top board and ends, the red pine being native to the more northern parts of New England.

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Of about the same date but serving a different level of colonial society, our pair of tall-back caned "periwig" chairs 3 take their name from the high pompadour "peruke" or wig of the period. With their

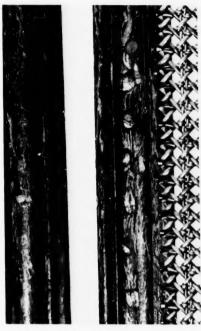


FIG. 2a. Detail of gold-painted decoration on the lacquered or japanned chairs

finely turned understructure and carved Spanish-scroll feet, the curved and channeled backposts with leaf-carved cresting, these are a type that appeared about 1690–1710 in a wide range of variants. Our own chairs (Fig. 2) are superior examples, apparently with no equal for the faded scarlet of their "japanning" and its delicately drawn gold-painting.

Done in imitation of Oriental lacquerwork, this sort of painted or "japanned" color with gold decoration had enjoyed a great vogue in England. Van Linschoten's account of his voyage to the East Indies (published 1598) told of seeing at Goa "many kinds of bedsteddes, stooles, and such like stuffe, very cunningly covered over with Lacke, most pleasant to behold," and added that "the fayrest Workemanshippe thereof cometh from China." So popular was this work during the seventeenth century, it came to be much copied by Dutch and English "lack-workers" or japanners, whose advertisements indicated that either the real (Oriental lacquered) or imitation (japanned) could be had. Lacquered screens, cabinets and boxes or other small articles were imported ever increasingly by the East India Company, but as early as 1616 a London workman was offering "worke after the China fashion, w^{ch} is much affected here."

The Museum owns a fine copy⁵ of Stalker & Parker's rare folio Treatise of Fapaning and Varnishing (1688) published in three editions at Oxford, and sold by John Stalker "at the Golden-Ball in St. James's Market, London." For half a century its text and exotic illustrations were plagiarized by many another author, so spreading the vogue for "JAPAN-work in Imitation of the INDIANS"

This new fashion had spread to Boston before 1700, and here found much encouragement. Nehemiah Partridge ("Japanner, upon the Mill Bridge") advertised in 1712 that he did "all Sorts of Japanning." Four years later, there had "come from London, a Parcel of very fine Clocks...in Japan cases or Wall-nut." The trade card of Thomas Johnson a "japanner at the Golden Lyon in Ann Street Boston" (active 1732-67) offered in 1732: "Jappan Work of all Sorts, as Chests of Draws, Chamber & Dressing Tables, Tea Tables, Writing-Desks, Book-Cases, Clock-Cases, &c."

Examples of early American japanning, from the great collections at Winterthur, may be seen in Joseph Downs, American Furniture (1952),-a Connecticut and two Boston highboys (Nos. 186-188) and four looking glasses from New York and Boston (Nos. 244-247). Of all these, ranging from quaintly poor to quite competent, and done on red or blue, black or mottled "tortoise" grounds, the gold decoration of a Boston frame No. 247 will be found most closely similar to the finely flowered gilding on our own chairs (see detail, Fig. 2a).

So much was this work admired that in the following generation it would become the polite accomplishment of artistic ladies. Among others, one John Waghornein 1740 opened a "School, at Five Pounds for each Scholar," at his house in Queen Street, Boston, having "lately received a fresh percel of materials for the new Method of Japaning, which was Invented in France, for the Amusement and Benefit of the Ladies, and is now practised by most of the Quality and Gentry in Great-Britain, with the greatest Satisfaction." Along with wax and shell or featherwork, painting on glass, tambour embroidery and other genteel arts, young ladies now took instruction in the painting of "japanned Tea Boards" (trays), firescreens, tea-chests or other articles whose curious decoration (copied from engraved "prints for Japanners") would have been little recognized by any citizen of the Flowery Kingdom.

GREGOR NORMAN-WILCOX

NOTES

Kettell, The Pine Furniture of Early New England (1929).

3 Accession No. A.6717.60-4, a-b, height of back 4634."

4 Wallace Nutting, op. cit., a quite similar model but with carved frontal stretcher (No. 1974), a pair from the Bigelow Collection (No. 2044-45), and a slightly later vaseback chair with delicate gold painting (No. 2092).

5 See pp. 6-11,-Bulletin of the Art Division, Vol. VII, No. 4, Fall 1955.

¹ Accession No. A.6717.60-3, top 18 x 40," height 3634." 2 Wallace Nutting, Furniture Treasury (1948), Nos. 103, 107, 217, 236-238, 341. Mr. Nutting says "about a score" of these chests & highboys are known, dating around 1690-1710. A charmingly painted highboy is pictured No. 45 in R. H.

A Selected List of Los Angeles County Museum Publications

A complete list of publications is available at the Museum Bookshop

California Water Color Society, 40th National exhibition, October 19 to November 27, 1960. (24 pages, illustrated.) \$1.00

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1060 Annual Exhibition, Artists of Los Angeles & Vicinity. Paintings in oil, and related media. (32 pages, illustrated, directory of artists.) \$1.00

Craftsmanship, 2nd Biennial Exhibition of Southern California Designer-Craftsmen, January 6 to February 7, 1960. (36 pages, illustrated.) \$1.25

1959 Annual Exhibition, Artists of Los Angeles & Vicinity. Oil paintings, water colors, graphic arts and sculpture. (36 pages, illustrated, directory of artists.) \$1.00

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